Tensions in Calvin’s Idea of Predestination

By Wing-hung Lam

A couple of weeks ago I had an opportunity of talking with a friend about the credibility of the Christian faith. When the conversation became somewhat personal, he bluntly said: ‘You don’t need to urge me to consider Christianity. I know there is a thing called ‘predestination’ in your religion. Now, if I am elected by God, I will be saved with or without your persuasion. If I am not chosen to heaven, why waste your time to convince me of the Christian belief? In either way, human effort has little place.’ The theological implication of this comment is significant.

Many an educated evangelical layman knows that the doctrine of predestination has a strong advocate in John Calvin, the sixteenth-century Protestant reformer. But not many are familiar with the strength and the weakness of his theology of predestination which is a central theme in the era of Reformation. As Philip Schaff, a prolific church historian, has observed: ‘All the Reformers of the sixteenth century, … under a controlling sense of human depravity and saving grace, in extreme antagonism to Pelagianism and self-righteousness, and … in full harmony not only with the greatest of the fathers, but also with the inspired St Paul, came to the same doctrine of a double predestination which decides the eternal destiny of all men.’[1] In this essay we attempt to analyse several areas of tension in Calvin’s thought.

In the first edition of Calvin’s *Institutes of the Christian Religion* in 1536, the doctrine of predestination is only briefly discussed in connection with the Apostle’s Creed and the definition of the church. During his exile in Strasbourg, Calvin expanded his concept which betrays his Augustinianism and attentive reading of Martin Bucer’s *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*. In the final edition of the *Institutes* in 1559, the setting of the doctrine is changed but not the essential content. Certainly, Calvin’s controversies with Bolsec, Pighius, Melanchthon, and Castellio over the years had enriched his thought.

Calvin regarded soteriological predestination as God’s eternal decree, by

> which he compacted with himself what he willed to become of each man. For all are not created in equal condition: rather, eternal life is fore-ordained for some, eternal damnation for others. Therefore, as any man has been created to one or the other of these ends, we speak of him as predestined to life or to death.[2]

The logical counterpart of election is reprobation, since election cannot, in Calvin's view, stand unless it is set over against reprobation. He continued:

> God is said to set apart those whom he adopts into salvation; it will be highly absurd to say that others acquire by chance or by their own effort what election alone confers on a few. Therefore, whom God passes over, he condemns: and this he does for no other reason than that he wills to exclude them from the inheritance which he predestines for his own children.[3]

Theological tensions in the idea of predestination are contained in his definition of the doctrine. And in Calvin's exposition the motivation in resolving them is easily recognizable.

The first tension is epistemological. Since the decree is eternal, how can we identify the God-favoured or the God-condemned? In the *Institutes* of 1539 Calvin warned against wishing to know too much about the mystery of predestination, probably as a reply to Zwingli's *The Providence of God*. He acknowledged the incomprehensibility of God but not divine unknowability. However, he disapproved Melanchthon's fear that investigation of the subject would harm the faith of believers. It is wrong to expound only that part of the doctrine understandable to our mind in order to make it more acceptable as if God's honour were protected by our hiding the truth. He was willing to go as far as scriptural revelation allowed.

Predestination, in Calvin's thought, is an article of faith, and reprobation, a doctrine of the elect. The non-elect never know that they are the reprobate. The logical opposite of the grace of salvation is known only to the believer who has experienced redemption, from which perspective the double decree is to be viewed. Every age has its number of reprobate. Calvin never spoke specifically of the reprobate in the present or future tense. Even Michael Servetus, who was burned at the stake in Geneva, was not regarded as such in his time. It is sacrilegious to exclude from the number of the chosen a sinner as being already

lost. Calvin taught a ‘certain judgment of charity’ that Christians should consider as elect those who profess faith in Christ. From the inspiration of St Augustine’s *The City of God*, Calvin admitted that the reprobate will dwell side by side with the elect until the Day of Judgment.

How is election confirmed? Although it is impossible to be certain of the electing activity of God, assurance can be secured in Christ. The grace of election is where Christ is. Calvin regarded Christ as the ‘mirror of election’ in whom to contemplate our predestination. He did not imply a passive role occupied by Christ, for Christ also ‘claims for himself, in common with the Father, the right to choose’.[4] No human factor would have influenced the electing process or would undo the benefits of it. Both Scripture and the sacraments of the church are objective evidences of Christ’s presence in the community of the elect, and the prompting of the Holy Spirit enlightens and convinces us of its reality. Thus divine election is to be apprehended by faith in the gospel, but not dependent upon it. Calvin pointed out two misconceptions regarding faith: ‘Some make man God’s co-worker, to ratify election by his consent’ and others ‘make election depend upon faith, as if it were doubtful and also ineffectual unless confirmed by faith.’[5] When he spoke of faith, he often came back to the conviction that the elect cannot lose their salvation, for Christ will not let his members be estranged from him.

The second tension in Calvin’s doctrine is: If God foreordained every event to happen, is he the author of evil in reprobation? This question involves the relation of predestination to providence, foreknowledge, and causality.

Predestination presupposes providence, and in Calvin there is a remarkable continuity between the two. The notion of providence means that God’s rule is extended to all parts of the world by his infinite wisdom and justice. Some medieval theologians, like Thomas Aquinas, regarded predestination as a particular application of the universal providence to the redemptive activity of God. Calvin saw the unifying cause of all phenomena in an omnipotent and omniscient deity, who is the author and consummator of all things. For ‘not only the heaven and the earth and the inanimate creatures, but also the plans and intentions of men, are so governed by his providence that they are borne by it straight to their appointed end’ (*Institutes*. I, 16, 8).

In late medieval time, the nominalist idea of *potentia absoluta* and *potentia ordinata* of God was popular. This signified divine, gratuitous mercy according to which ‘he chose, absolutely free from external interference, undetermined by any cause whatever apart from himself, to accept man’s moral virtue as meritorious for

his salvation'.[6] God does not impart salvation without merits. Man's free will should decide between good and evil. And predestination depends on divine knowledge of man's future response. To help man attain personal virtues God has graciously assisted him to do his best. On the principle that the end includes the means, Thomas Aquinas held that predestination of the individual to eternal life includes in it all necessary graces and qualifications as effects, not causes, of predestination. In Thomas's view, God predestines grace to the elect that they may merit glory. Following this tradition, Pighius, Calvin's contemporary, argued that the reprobate are those foreknown by God to be unworthy of his goodness. This was the case with God's discrimination between Esau and Jacob.

But in Calvin's understanding, foreknowledge does not mean prior in time but transcendent in time. God operates in the realm of eternity, which is qualitatively, not quantitatively, different from the temporal continuum. He embraces the entire human history in his eternal present. This simultaneous knowledge implies that God does not make a decision at some past moment and then, after an interval, brings it into action. Only human activity goes this way. God does not only conceive events through ideas but 'he truly looks upon them and discerns them as things placed before him'.[7] He is no passive observer of events to occur.

Like foreknowledge, predestination is not to be understood in temporal terms. It does not depend on foreknowledge. Both belong to God, and it is preposterous to represent one as contingent upon the other. No causal connection between foreknowledge and predestination can be established, whether this foreknowledge is of human merits or of divine grace imparted to man. To say that predestination is conditioned by foreknowledge is to introduce an indirect human factor, outside the divine intellect, that will destroy the absoluteness of the sovereign will.

Calvin maintained two important premises regarding foreknowledge and causality. First, foreknowledge is properly so called only if what it foreknows happens. Secondly, purely on the level of foreknowledge, no causal necessity is imposed on men. These two assertions exposed Calvin to the criticism, launched by Jerome Bolsec, that he had made God the author of sin. As Bolsec argued, the grace of God enlightens every man, enabling him to believe in Christ if he wishes. The cause of predestination, conceived by God in eternity, is not to be found in God's will but in man's work. Election and reprobation are divine confirmation of human response.

The whole issue has much to do with the meaning of causality in Calvin's double decree. Predestination, according to his definition, is an *a priori*, exclusive business within the triune Godhead. It is an eternal decision for the eternal destiny

of each human individual. Nothing about the temporal world is yet mentioned. Viewing from this perspective, the question, Is God the author of evil? is wrongly asked, because it is an *a posteriori* question, taking the ethics of human history into consideration. Sin and evil are categories of the created order, and they cannot be applied to the Creator. If man were to peep into the realm of divine logic, he would from that standpoint comprehend the rationale of the divine decree. However, to say this much was not enough to silence his foes in the controversial situation of Calvin's day.

Calvin continued to point out two kinds of causality. Primary causality belongs to God alone, an activity beyond external interference. This causality is different from the human understanding of cause and effect, such as smoke coming from fire. Predestination has been wrongly regarded as a projection of this kind of rational causality to the divine plan. Understood in this manner, when God reprobates some to damnation, he cannot escape the title of being the author of evil. But Calvin's view of primary causation is different. He admitted his ignorance of, and forbids any human inquiry into, the eternal and concealed counsel of God in predestination. The question 'Is God the author of evil?' is a challenge to God's primary causality, which Calvin could not answer logically. He only dogmatically defended the wholesomeness of the first cause by affirming that God's will is just and that God is not the author of evil. He appealed to the holy and gracious nature of deity rather than the consistency of human logic which he disparaged as invalid description of the eternal purpose.

However, when predestination is to be preached and historical contingency is considered, another kind of causality comes into play: proximate causality. God displays his power through secondary media and his power is never separated from these media. In rebutting Pighius, Calvin argued that the origin of man's ruin was in Adam and that each man finds the proximate cause of his ruin in himself. There is no parallel treatment between election and reprobation. In election there is a direct relation between God and man. But in reprobation, there is a proximate factor in the process. A judicial element is present which has no counterpart in election.[8] Election presupposes no human merits, but sheer grace. Reprobation results in eternal damnation which presupposes human sin. Such proximate cause, the solution offered by Calvin, enabled him to ascribe all praise to God for his election and all blame to man for his damnation. For him the two causalities always harmonize in the sovereign will. Thus a twofold theodicy is developed.

The third tension deals with morality. If man's destiny has been fixed from eternity, how can he be a free and responsible agent? If he is made unable by God

to choose for salvation, why should he be condemned?

In criticizing Calvin's view of predestination, Pighius, followed by the Armenians in the seventeenth century, argued from the assumption that divine sovereignty and human responsibility are mutually exclusive. The fall has not disrupted man's volitional faculty in such a way that he cannot choose what is good. God has never forced men into his kingdom for to do so would violate his principle of justice. Faith is not divinely given, but generated and sustained by the believer himself. The entire human race is elected in Christ, and only personal refusal can relinquish it.

The divine will is undoubtedly holy, just, and good. From this conviction Calvin derived courage to defend the ethics of God's will by asserting that it is the 'highest rule of perfection' and 'the law of all laws'. There is an intrinsic correlation between divine nature and divine will. In predestination God's ethical nature conditions his will; therefore, God is not the author of sin. Reciprocally, God's will governs his nature as he is the author of reprobation. Absolute sovereignty is the necessary function in predestination and the final court of appeal for Calvin. The divine will is self-reasoning and self-judging, and is entirely beyond human understanding. Consequently it is impious to investigate the cause of the will of God, than which nothing is higher.

How does man's will operate? In the original creation Adam was given an integral, free will to choose good or evil. But after the Fall, this genuine liberty has been forfeited to his posterity. Calvin accepted St Bernard's threefold analysis of liberty that man is free from necessity, which characterizes man as man, but not free from sin and misery. Because of this man sins 'inevitably' yet 'responsibly', and it is man's own choice without coercion.

Calvin emphasized both the difference and the coincidence of God's will and man's will. He maintained with St. Augustine

> that both man and apostate angels, as far as they were themselves concerned, did that which God willed not, or which was contrary to his will; but that, as far as God's overruling omnipotence is concerned, they could not, in any manner, have done it without his will.[9]

Man may will 'contrary to God's will' but 'not without his will'. In the same event two different wills, sinful and holy, are in joint function. For 'it came to pass that

by this same will of the creature, God, though in one sense unwilling, yet accomplished what He willed'.[10] 'In one sense unwilling' is to be understood as due to the disobedience of man, but the omnipotence of God overrules the situation to achieve the divine purpose. God's will is simple, never at war with itself, although it appears manifold to us because of our mental incapacity to understand how in diverse manner it can will and does not will the same thing. Both wills converge on the same event. Man's will stands to be judged and God's will, to judge. With this dynamic relationship of wills, Calvin dismissed the charge of fatalism and determinism.

With respect to evangelism, Calvin sought to reconcile the two facts that by external preaching all are called to repentance and yet that the Spirit of repentance is not given to all. Would God be contrary to himself if he universally invites all but admits only the elect? Herein lies the fourth tension.

In Calvin's opinion, vocation is the work of the Spirit employing the means of the external word. Word and Spirit have to proceed together for effectual calling. The preaching of the Word itself does not constitute vocation. Nor does the efficacy of divine vocation depend on the receptivity of man, otherwise man may at least boast that he has answered the call and has offered himself.

Calvin acknowledged the reality of an external call in which the preached Word is not accompanied by the internal testimony of the Spirit. This is seen in the history of salvation and in the development of the covenantal relationship. After the creation of Adam, a universal covenant was established between God and man. Man is categorically different from animal and is to rule over the earth. Then precedence was given to one race over others. Abraham was chosen, and God freely offered to grant blessing to his children. The third stage consisted in a distinction within Abraham's family, a more limited scope of election. Later on when the whole Israel was chosen as a nation, only a spiritual remnant shared the grace of salvation. In this context the final stage of election is set: the election of individuals. For 'God has made a covenant of eternal life and calls any people to himself; a special mode of election is employed for a part of them, so that he does not with indiscriminate grace effectually elect all.'[11] Equal distribution of grace is not divine obligation, and inequality indicates that it is free.

General election is not always effectual because the Spirit of regeneration is not immediately bestowed on those with whom God has made a covenant. And the external calling, without the internal illumination of the Spirit, is an intermediate stage between the rejection of some and the election of others. God has the full

right to give or to withhold the working of the Spirit. Thus the entire Israel was called the inheritance of God, but there were many foreigners.

What, then, is the relation between election and vocation? Will the eternal counsel of God conflict with the temporal proclamation of the gospel? In resolving these apparently opposite motifs, Calvin insisted that the two standpoints must not be mixed. On the divine side, there is no duality of will, though it is not demonstrable to us. On the human side we should confine our attention to scriptural instruction. The invitation of the gospel always has existential significance for the audience. When the Word is preached, it means a time for decision. The election of some through universal invitation does not rule out a sincere offer of the gospel to the non-elect. Calvin repudiated the way of preaching which consists in telling the people that if they do not believe, the reason is that they have already been destined for destruction. Sloth and bad intention will be produced by this perversion of the gospel message. This will be cursing rather than teaching.

Calvin's basic approach in dealing with the tensions in his concept of predestination is to keep both the human and the divine perspective unconfused. The inadequate human way of knowing cannot scrutinize the infinite counsel of the eternal decree, which is only partially revealed in Scripture. Man should stay within scriptural limits and be satisfied. This theological division of labour enables Calvin to resolve the conflicts in his theology. Reckless consistency is applied to the hermeneutic of the two fold decree. After human effort has been exhausted, Calvin seeks 'refuge' in the realm of divine mystery in face of irreconcilable tenets. His argument stems from sound reasoning although his theology may not be convincing enough to some people at this point.

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[1] *Creeds of Christendom*, 1 (1877), p. 451.

[2] *Institutes*, III, 21, 5; trans. by F. L. Battles (Westminster, 1960).

[3] *Institutes*, III, 23, 1.

[4] *Institutes*, III, 22, 7.

[5] *Institutes*, III, 24, 3.

[6] H. Oberman, *The Harvest of Medieval Theology*, p. 186.

[7] *Institutes*, III, 21, 5.

[8] *Commentary on Romans*, 9:11, 30.

[9] *Calvin's Calvinism*, trans. by H. Cole, p. 126.

[10] *Ibid.*, p. 43.

[11] *Institutes*, III, 21, 7.

Wing-hung Lam

China Graduate School of Theology, Hong Kong

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